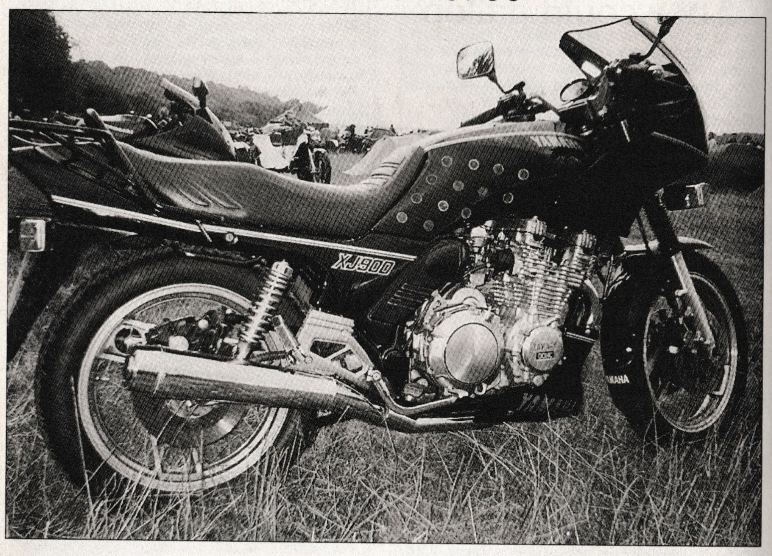
SHAFT FOR ALL SEASONS

Steve Bergman Spills The Beanz On The Yamaha XJ900



In 1983 Yamaha introduced the first of the XJ900 range. With a 97bhp, 853cc double overhead camshaft, in-line four cylinder engine dragging 480lbs of bike around there was nothing immediately unusual about the XJ900. However, there were ideas which were not so well accepted.

Yamaha had designed the bike with adjustable, air assisted front forks which were also fitted with an anti-dive system. In addition, Yamaha had fitted rear shock absorbers with remote oil reservoirs and damping adjustment. Both were fine ideas but the anti-dive fitted to the forks seemed to do weird things to the handling and was greeted as over-complicated by the public. The XJ900 was not alone in this problem, it was shared by many other bikes at the time. In addition, another shared trait was the air leaking out of the forks on bumpy roads as the seals were subjected to changes in air pressure above and below atmospheric. And the handling problems were made worse by a handlebar-mounted half fairing which got blamed for the bike's weaves.

Still, the XJ900, with its excellent shaft drive and thoroughly good looks, made a good all-round touring bike that would return a good 45mpg on average and still give a good 40mpg when using the full performance. The XJ900 was generally comfortable too, although the seat could feel a bit hard after 100 miles or so. In addition the XJ could be fitted with capacious luggage, like rigid panniers and tank bags. More importantly, it could be fitted with most generally available luggage, not needing something special or particular to the model. The XJ sold reasonably well and proved to be reliable.

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They could also gallop along at a quite reasonable rate for the time, topping at a claimed 130mph. As long as the road was reasonably smooth and straight. Otherwise the suspension and fairing would connive to frighten you. Or failing that, your passenger. It has to be said though, that vibration could become quite intrusive at high speed with dead fingers a certainty and blown light bulbs a possibility.

Late in 1984 Yamaha revised the XJ900, replacing the air assisted, anti-dive forks with what we could call regular ones. Just ordinary non-adjustable telescopic forks. They also changed the rear shocks for regular ones. No damping adjustment, just spring preload adjustment.

This seemed to do the trick as far as the suspension was concerned. What it says about middle Eighties technology is uncertain. Per-

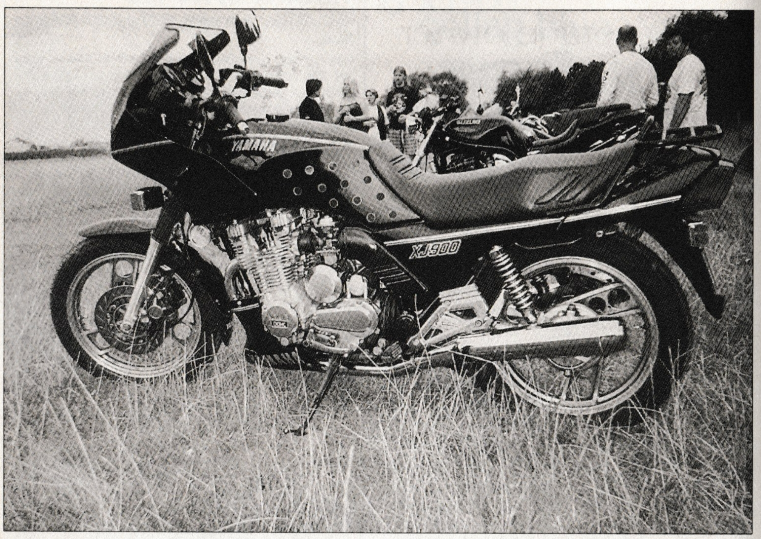
haps it's just a case of trying to give the punter a choice of settings within a budget? Whatever, pretty soon all the Japanese manufacturers were going back to the regular no-choice set-up. Curious really as most modern bikes are available with so many settings on the suspension that half your journey time could be wasted messing with the settings if you're not focused enough – even if you have read the manual and understand about compression damping, rebound damping and preload!

At the same time that the suspension changes were made, the handlebar mounted fairing was replaced with a frame mounted one. There is no doubt that this would, or should, have had the biggest impact on handling. The shimmy and wobble over undulations and in corners was consigned to the past along with the history of rubber-framed Japanese bikes.

Along with all the other changes introduced in 1984 there was an increase in engine capacity to 891cc from 853cc. To complement this, the carburettors were increased in size from 35mm to 36mm and a redesigned clutch with six springs instead of five was installed. Other minor changes included a resiting of the choke operating mechanism by moving the cable operating lever and cable from the handlebar and fitting a push-pull knob to a shaft mounted directly onto the carburettors.

Reliability on the updated XJ900 remained good, although as with most things problems can occur at very high mileage. But then the XJ900 was never going to set your pants on fire with regard to performance, being firmly aimed at the budget touring market. This invariably means the average owner is at least 35 plus, probably 45 plus, very sensible and uses it for touring holidays with the wife and the occasional sunny Sunday spin.

So don't accept the odd high mileage bike unless the price is right, as there are loads of low mileage ones that have been lovingly polished and cared for. You might find the tyres are a bit age-hardened, even if they are nicely painted up with that tyre paint stuff! More on tyres later.



As far as maintenance is concerned, with one exception, the Yamaha XJ900 is dead easy. The exception first.

The Yamaha XJ900 is cunningly fitted with 'YICS'. When you have had too many beers or have a puncture, either of which could stop you from riding home for your Sunday dinner, you press the button marked YICS and the Yamaha Instant Customer Saver affects the space-time continuum in a subtle way allowing you to get home before the problem occurred. Or it's the Yamaha Induction Control System which joins up the inlet tracts on the four carburettors, thus making for smoother riding at low speed. I know which I'd prefer!

The other effect of the Yamaha Induction Control System is that you need a special tool to insert into the connections, thus allowing you to balance the carburettors in the conventional manner. The more mechanically dextrous among you will easily be ably to make up your own one of these.

As for the rest of the servicing, it's all pretty straightforward. The 20W/40 grade engine oil is changed every 4000 miles. But if you are doing short journeys on those sunny Sundays, or 4000 miles or less a year, you would be well advised to change it more frequently. Look, oil isn't that expensive, if you're hardly using the bike change it every 2000 and don't be so tight! In addition the manual will tell you to change the oil filter every other oil change, which they say is yearly or every 8000 miles. The average XJ900 will be a classic before it gets to 8000 miles. The oil filter is located under a housing at the front of the engine and is one of those cheap paper cartridge type. So change it when you change the oil.

When you relocate the oil filter casing put copperslip on the O-ring and on the casing and bolt joints. This will ensure it comes off easily next time and will stop corrosion should you, heaven forbid, take it out in the winter when there's salt on the road.

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The same goes for the axle oil. The manual will tell you to change it every 16,000 miles but that's a lifetime for some bikes. Changing the oil in the axle has got to be one of the easiest jobs on the bike so do it every year at least.

In addition, each year you should also check the valve clearances. The valves are operated via a bucket and shim with the shim being on top of the bucket under the camshaft. Checking the clearances and changing the shim is as easy as pie, especially as it hardly ever needs doing. New spark plugs will complete your service shopping list.

The alternator on the XJ900 has brushes and it's worth checking these. It's a simple operation where you check whether the brush lengths are within the tolerances given in the manual and change them if not. Either way, the job is a quick and easy exercise.

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Finish off your yearly Spring check by seeing what condition the air cleaner is in. It's a paper type so if it looks too dodgy chuck it out and get a new one.

Other checks which you can leave longer than every year would include changing the fork oil, and checking the steering and swinging arm bearings. The latter have a stub axle on each side as opposed to the regular shaft all the way through. This means they are a real doddle to check, grease or replace. Just support the bike and bits and screw one out of one side after releasing the locknut. Clean it and grease it and put it back. The adjustment is screw and locknut. Couldn't be easier.

The XJ900 has 18" wheels back and front. The front tyre is a 100/90 v18 and the back tyre is a 120/90 v18 as standard and there's probably little point in messing about with other sizes, especially as the wheel rims are quite narrow. This means if you do fit a wider tyre with a lower profile the wheel rim will pinch it into the standard shape and the tyre to rim seal will suffer as a result.

Tyre choice is going to be limited to middle of the road tyres. But tyres such as the Avon Super Venom or Michelin Macadam will give as much performance as the bike has in hand. If you are looking for better rates of wear then Bridgestone dual compound tyres with the hard bit in the middle would fit the bill.

On a bike like the XJ900, handling characteristics can be very much affected by tyre choice. If you're moving from a BMW which was fitted with Metzeler then perhaps you should try them on the XJ900. Unless you are commuting or doing courier work on the bike, your tyres are going to last you absolute donkeys' so it's going to be worth getting lots of advice and getting the best tyres you can.

Tyre pressures should be increased or decreased according to use and load. The front end runs between 32 and 36psi and the back end runs between 36 and 42psi. With soft-walled tyres such as the Avon Super Venom a drop of only a few pounds in tyre pressure will make a considerable difference on how light the steering is. Or is not!

The brakes are discs all round, with a twin set-up at the front using excellent opposed piston callipers. The rear single disc also uses a opposed piston calliper. You should not experience any major problems with the brakes. Given the need for the traditional yearly check and piston clean-up, the brakes should give no problem and are capable of playing tunes with the tyres!

Prices for the XJ900 vary from as low as £1000 to as high as £3000. It all depends on model and condition. But if you're looking for a long term bike for leisure then it's worth searching around for that highly polished low mileage jobby. These bikes really are nice to ride, comfortable and reliable. Alright it's 80s technology, and although the XJ900 qualified as a sports tourer back then, it's hardly in the same league as a current Honda VFR800. But the XJ is still worth consideration if you are of the mind that today's bikes all look a bit the same. With its half fairing exposing the frame and engine the XJ900, in some eyes, looks like 'a real motorcycle'.

In December 1994 the XJ900F was discontinued in favour of the totally redesigned XJ900S Diversion. Although a different bike the Divvy does much the same job. But then you'll have to read about that another time!